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SUBJECT: PROGRESS IN BRIDGING GAP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND
CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: GUATEMALA 99

11. (U) Summary: The Ambassador has been facilitating constructive dialogue between civil society and the Colom government, urging both sides to find common ground. The most recent event was a meeting at the Residence between human rights leader Helen Mack and Minister of Government Gandara where both agreed to meet regularly. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Since his appointment in December 2008, Minister of Government Salvador Gandara has faced strong criticism from the Guatemalan human rights community. Part of the friction stems from the fact that Gandara's predecessor, Francisco Jimenez, was the candidate of the human rights community. Jimenez, who is bright and honest, was nevertheless widely regarded as an ineffective leader and manager. His replacement by the much more operationally inclined Gandara, and Jimenez's appointment as Secretary of the new National Security Council were good news to many who had seen the security situation deteriorate under Jimenez, but were worrisome to human rights groups. Meanwhile, human rights leaders have continued to criticize Gandara's appointment, accusing him of being involved in social cleansing while Mayor of Villanueva and when he was Vice Minister of Government in the Arzu government, and of being close to persons, such as Luis Mendizabal, who have also been accused of social cleansing (reftel).

13. (SBU) Ambassador has used our credibility with human rights leaders and Gandara to persuade them to find common ground. In January, he hosted a lunch roundtable with human rights leaders, and on February 20 he hosted a private meeting between Gandara and leading human rights activist Helen Mack. Gandara and Mack discovered that they shared views on police reform, police training, and setting up a planning/chief of staff cell in the National Civilian Police (with Mack emphasizing the planning aspect, and Gandara focusing on the operational side). They also shared views on ensuring that the Police Inspector General reports directly to the Chief of Police.

14. (SBU) Mack pressed Gandara pointblank on whether he had been involved in social cleansing and whether he was preparing to hire Luis Mendizabal. Gandara denied both outright, and pledged that under his watch there would be "no Rambos" or social cleansing. The Ambassador reiterated the importance of that commitment. The meeting concluded with mutual commitments to stay in contact (they later agreed to meet February 26), and in particular for Mack to provide input to Gandara on proposed changes in the law governing police structure and policies. In a subsequent meeting with an AID official, Mack expressed gratitude for the Embassy's role in brokering the meeting. While Mack still has doubts about Gandara, she says the relationship with the Ministry of Government has increased substantially.

15. (SBU) Comment: This is a good example of how the Embassy can bridge differences between important sectors of society. While there will continue to be some tension between human rights groups and the government, the meeting between Mack and Gandara underscored the significant extent to which they -- and we -- agree on key objectives.
McFarland